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# The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of McPherson County

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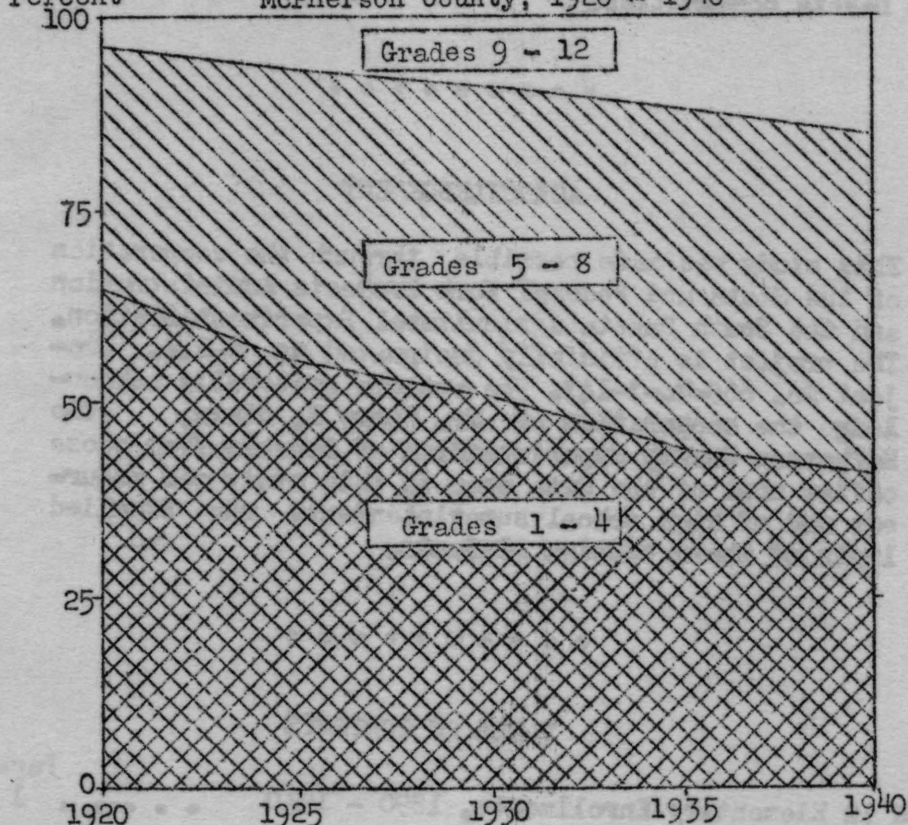
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT  
in  
the Elementary Schools  
of  
McPherson County

W. F. Kumlien  
Howard M. Sauer  
C. Scandrette

Percentage Distribution of School Enrollments in  
McPherson County, 1920 - 1940



The enrollment for the first four grades made up about 65 percent of the total school enrollment for all grades in McPherson county in 1920; by 1940 it had fallen to about 40 percent. During the same period the high school enrollment increased from 3 percent to over 14 percent of the entire school enrollment.

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## EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other McPherson county leaders by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W.P.A. Project No. 665-74-3-143. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mr. Henry H. Stein, the McPherson County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study was secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Trend in Elementary Enrollments, 1890 - 1940	1
Declining Birth Rates and Population	
Decrease as Factors in Enrollment Trends	2
Elementary Enrollments by Districts—1920, 1930, 1940	3-4
Elementary Enrollment as Related to Costs Per Pupil	5-6
When Schools can be Closed Advantageously	7
High School Attendance Areas Suggest Basis for Reorganization	8
Improved Roads Show Increasing Accessibility of Farm Areas to Village Service Centers	9
How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem	10

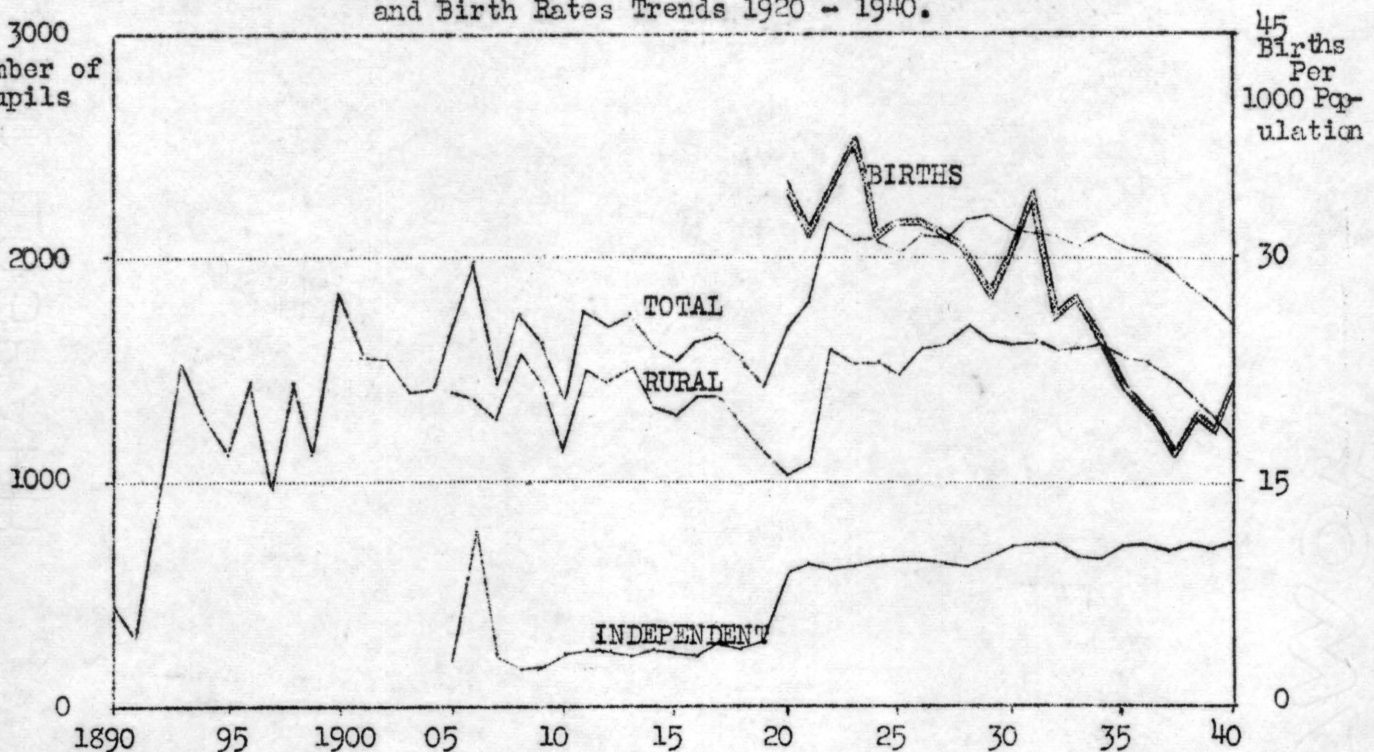


## The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of McPherson County

Population experts have been predicting for a number of years, that the downward trend of the birth rate will cause a serious decline in the elementary school enrollment. This prediction has been fulfilled in McPherson county as shown in Figure 1. There was a sharp increase in enrollment during the period 1890-1900, when the number of pupils increased from 447 to 1836. The high peak in enrollment was reached in 1929 when the total elementary enrollment was 2178 pupils. Since that time there has been a gradual decline leaving the 1940 enrollment of 1695 pupils lower than it was thirty years ago. As shown in Figure 1 the elementary enrollments of the independent schools have changed very little in the past twenty years.

The trend in the McPherson county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. It will be noted that the birth rate trend is even more abrupt than the enrollment trend for the same period. During the five year period 1920-1924 the average number of births per 1000 of the population was 34.1 as compared with 19.4 for the five years at the close of the period 1936-1940. The result of this downward trend in the birth rate has been a steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age.






Figure 1. Elementary Enrollment Trends in McPherson County 1890-1940 and Birth Rates Trends 1920 - 1940.



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction 16th U. S. Census 1940, and State Board of Health Annual Reports.

Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses in McPherson County, 1930 - 1940.

Spring Creek -2.8	Detmold -7.8	Petersburg -19.8	Bergdorf -10.3	Harrison 9.1	Wacker 0.0	Weber -19.0	Wachter -19.7
Glucksthal -8.6	Rosenthal -8.2	Odessa -16.2	Long Lake -17.7	Highland -9.3	Hoffman -24.6	Koto -11.9	Carl 12.8
Bauer 3.4	Stickel -34.3	Kassel -1.6	Moscow -20.0	Arena -15.0	Spring -38.2	Leola -7.7	Willow -17.3
Jackson -9.7	Hillsview -23.3	Cleveland -6.0	Blaine 13.8	Dewey -9.3	Howard -18.1	Washington 7.9	Lincoln -20.9

Legend:  Gained or no change  Lost 10.0-19.9%  Lost 30.0-39.9%  
 Lost 0.0-9.9%  Lost 20.0-29.9%

Source: Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940

An important factor in the elementary enrollment decline is shown in Figure 2--the loss of population through outward migration. Between 1930 and 1940 the population loss in McPherson county was 5.9 percent. Although this is not as great a loss as was experienced in some counties, it is a factor closely related to rural enrollment decline in the state. During the same period, 1930-1940, Leola, the county seat showed a population gain of 9.8 percent and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county increased 12.3 percent. Thus it is apparent that the bulk of the losses were suffered by the rural areas, a fact which is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollments.

In McPherson county only five of the 32 townships gained in population, one remained unchanged and 26 townships lost in population during the 1930-1940 period. The losses ranged from 1.6 percent in Kassel township to 38.2 percent in Spring township. That a direct relationship exists between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the townships with the greatest loss in population (see Figures 2 and 3) had the greatest percent of decline in elementary school enrollment.



Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in McPherson County Districts, 1920, 1930 and 1940

Spring Creek	(2) -	(1) 67*	(2) 20	(1) -	(2) -	(1) 29*	(2) -	(1) -	(2) Wacker (1)	Weber	Wachter
69	20	80*	13	30	12	69*	19	22	7	38	41
77	Detmold	8	16	14	Bergdorf	12	4	4	10	30	29
70	(3) -	(4) -	(3) 21	(4) -	(3) -	(4) -	(5) 7	Harrison	19	24	21
	19	5	8	19	8	9	20	15	21		
(4) 7	(2) -	(1) 41*	(2) -	(1) 11	(2) 15	(1) 11	43	6			
11	12	8	16	15	16	15	Richland		Hoffman	Koto	Carl
7	15	15	15	7	6	7	60		27	33	32
Glucksthal	Rosenthal	15	Odessa	Long Lake	(3) -	(4) 10	39		38	46	32
(3) 10	(3) -	(4) -	(3) -	(4) -	(3) 19	(4) 14	32		23	41	42
12	15	14	16	19	11	14					
14	10	3	6	14							
(2) 8	(2) 7	(1) 10	(2) -	(1) -	(2) -	(1) -	Arena		Spring	Leola Independent	Willow
11	12	13	12	13	17	12	45		50	193	71
19	5	11	10	11	11	8	54		28	205	66
Bauer	Stickel	(4) 6	Kassel	Moseley	(3) -	(4) 18	46		18	167	50
(3) 12	(3) 7	(4) 6	(3) -	(4) -	(3) 17	10					
16	12	14	17	15	11	5					
6	5	11	10	20							
(2) 13	(1) 39	(2) 12	(2) 20	(1) 18	(2) 5	(1) 16	Dewey		Howard	Washington	Wetonga Independent
11	57	24	12	20	14	13	(1) 11*		34	24	78
5	54	25	20	15	12	11	13		37	37	62
Jackson	Hillsview	(3) 26	Cleveland	Blaine	(3) 18	(4) -	19		25	38	46
(3) 13	(4) 25	(3) 26	(3) 15	(4) 9	(3) 6	13	(2) -				
8	28	15	16	16	17	14	20				
9	21	13	12	6		14	15				

Legend:

Top figure 1920 enrollment. Middle figure 1930 enrollment. Lower figure 1940 enrollment.

\* Indicates enrollment for whole township for that year

( ) Indicates district number

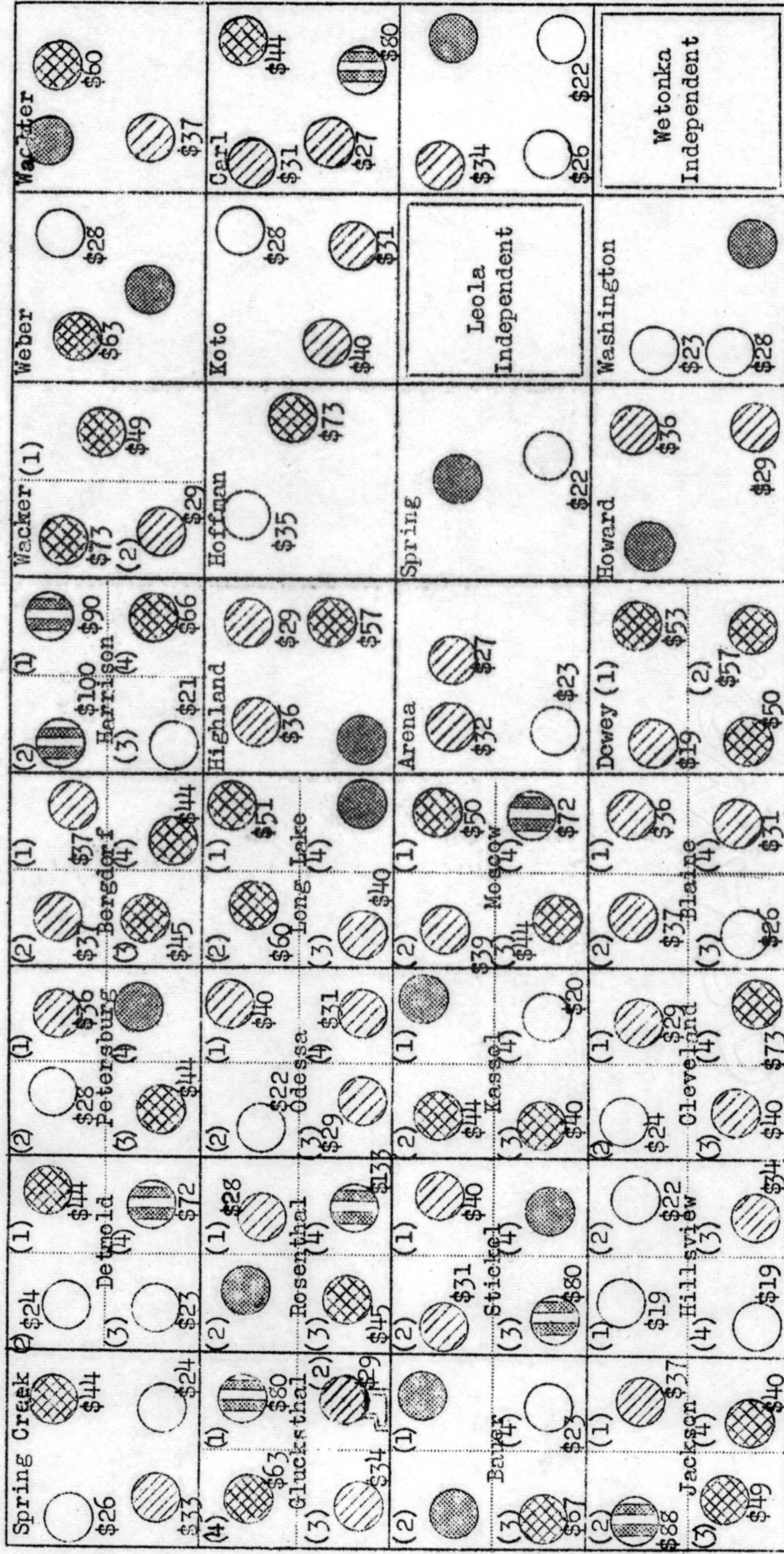
Source: Records of McPherson County Superintendent






In 1940, ninety four elementary schools were in operation in McPherson county. In addition there were three independent districts; Eureka, Leola and Wetonka, in operation.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3, which lists the enrollment of each district in the county for 1920, 1930 and 1940. While there were a few districts that gained in enrollment during the periods 1920-1930 and 1930-1940, a large majority showed a loss. In fact, of the 32 townships in the county, 26 showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with the 1930 figures. In 1940, 14 schools had been closed, nine were operating with five or less pupils, and 28 schools had only 6 to 10 pupils. A comparison of the enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows the serious nature of the enrollment decline. In 1920 there were 1,708 rural school pupils enrolled, compared with 1,217 in 1940. While there was an average of 22.7 pupils in 1920 there was an average of only 12.8 pupils per school in 1940. Barring unforeseen population changes, further enrollment losses may be expected in coming years, although the rate of decline may not be so rapid.



Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School in McPherson County, 1940



Legend:  Closed school  5 or fewer pupils  6-10 pupils  11-15 pupils  16 or more pupils

The figure below or above each school represents the instructional cost per pupil.

Numbers in township quarters indicate school district

Source: Records of McPherson County Superintendent of Schools



As may be seen in Figure 4, there is a wide variation in the cost per pupil in the schools of McPherson county. In general, it is those schools with the smallest enrollments which show the greatest per pupil cost. The instructional cost per pupil of operating the common schools of McPherson county ranged from \$19 per pupil in Hillsview, District 1, where they had 54 pupils and two teachers, to \$133 per pupil in Rosenthal, District 4, where three pupils were enrolled.

Table I indicates that the operation of schools for ten or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on an instructional cost per pupil basis. This is particularly true for those schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for the nine schools in this group was \$85.85 as compared with \$34.38, the average for all schools.

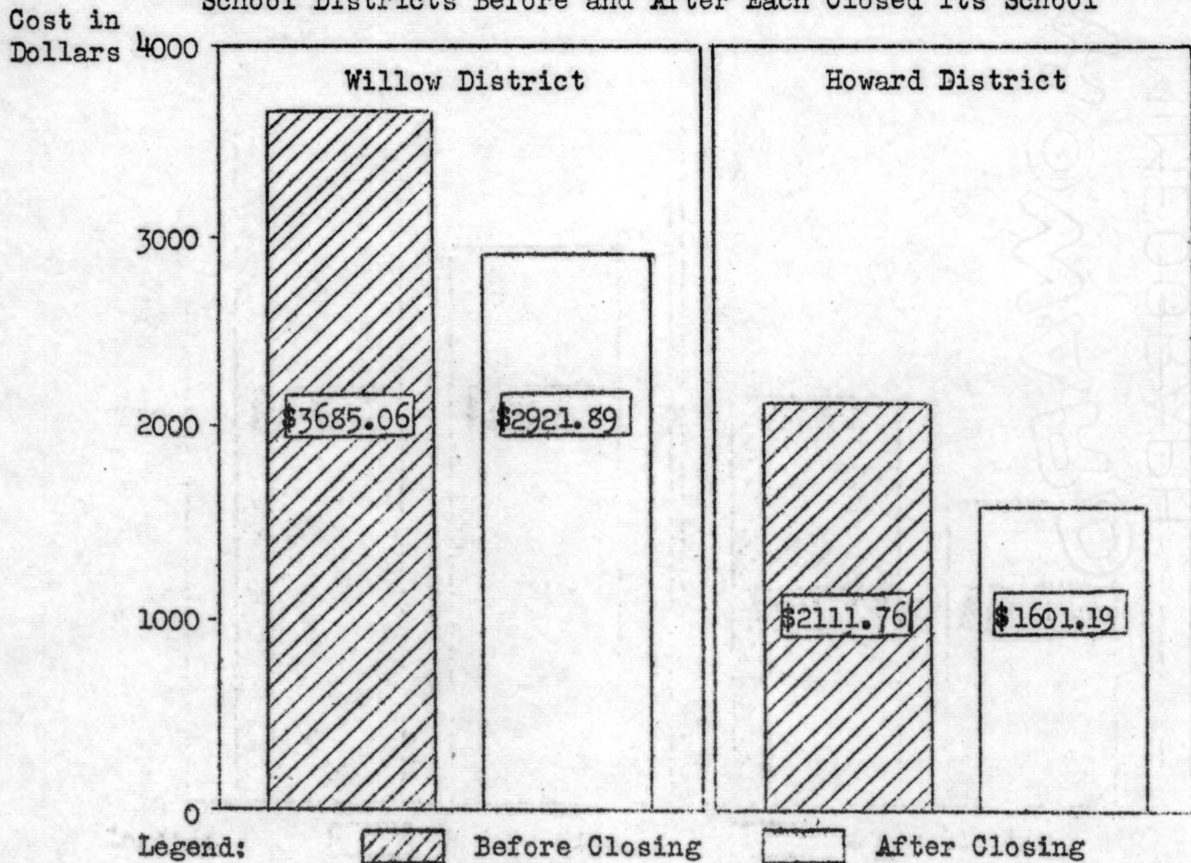
Table I. Instructional Cost Per Pupil for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in McPherson County, 1940

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	94	1,217	\$41,848.00	\$34.38
5 or fewer	9	41	3,520.00	85.85
6 - 10 pupils	28	222	111,592.00	52.21
11 - 15 pupils	33	451	14,866.00	32.95
16 or more pupils	24	503	11,870.00	23.59

\* Based on teachers salaries only

Source: Records of McPherson county Superintendent of Schools

Figure 5. Costs of Elementary Education in Two McPherson County School Districts Before and After Each Closed its School



Source: Records of County Superintendent of Schools

As a means of reducing high per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have during recent years, closed a large number of schools, particularly those with diminishing enrollments.

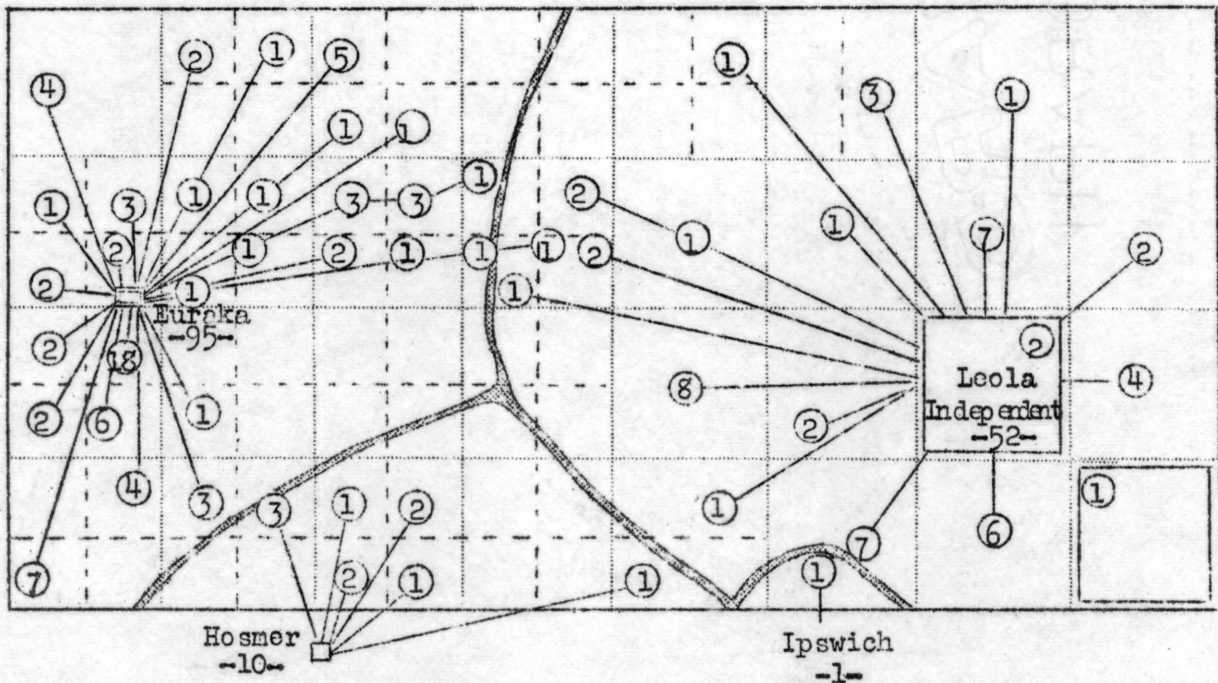
During the 1935-36 school term, it cost a total of \$3,685.06 to operate the four schools in Willow district. The following year one school was closed and the pupils were sent to another school where their tuition and transportation were paid. That year it cost the district \$2,921.89, a saving of \$763.17. A similar saving was made in Howard district. During the 1938-39 school term it cost \$2,111.76 to operate this district as compared with \$1,601.19 the following year when one school was closed. (See Figure 5.)

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and the fact that a small school is relatively inefficient from an educational point of view,\* it seems advisable from a financial and educational standpoint to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

\* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is not only difficult to get students interested, but there is a lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition.



Figure 6. Open Country Areas in McPherson County from Which High Schools Drew Their Students, 1940



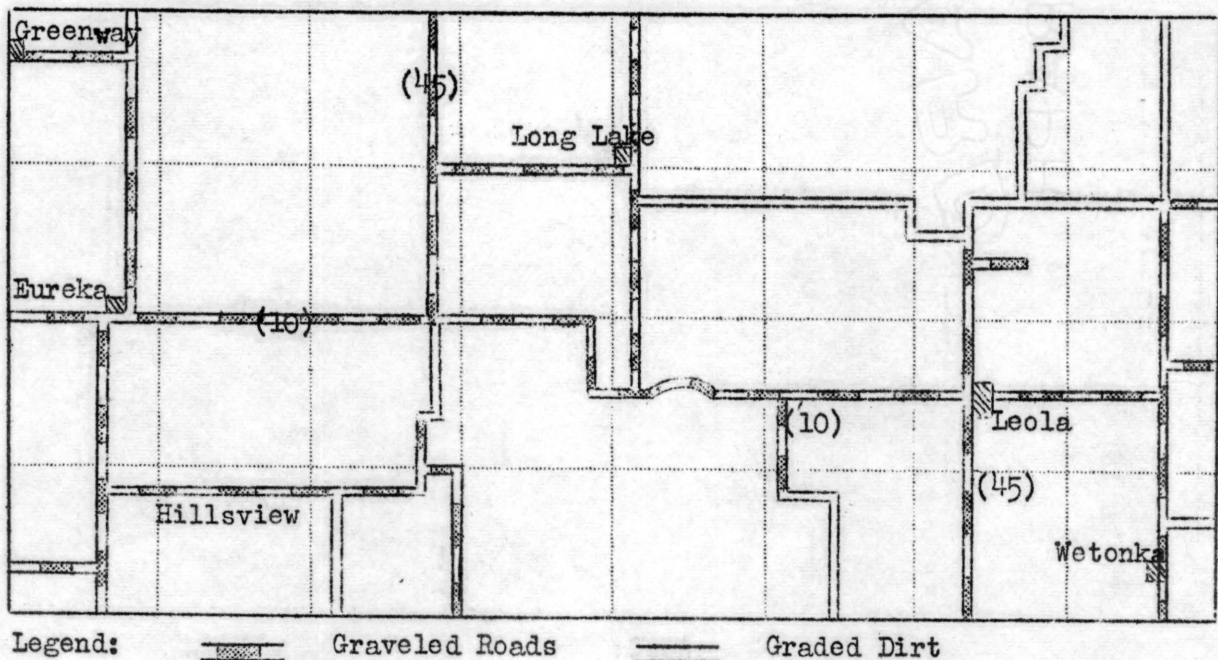
Source: Records of High School Superintendents

Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for school districts without high schools of their own to pay the tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their McPherson county tuition students, numbering approximately 160 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive the people of the districts of McPherson county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. Perhaps a similar plan could be adopted to elementary education. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and costs per pupil mount, it would appear to be a practical solution to close the rural schools and send the remaining pupils to village schools. In such a plan the home district would pay tuition and transportation costs. This plan has the advantage of economy, and of extending to farm children the superior facilities and techniques of the town school.

However, until such time as concentration of educational services in town centers become more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollment falls below a minimum and sending their pupils to the nearest rural school still operating.



Figure 7. Highway System in McPherson County, 1941



Source: Official Map of the State Highway Commission, 1941

As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads, are found in most portions of McPherson county. Good roads, together with the automobile, has placed the towns of the county within easy reach of a vast majority of farm families, thus revolutionizing many aspects of rural life. A number of services formerly performed by open country institutions on a neighborhood basis have been shifted to town and village centers. Cases in point are the crossroads general store and the open country church. The farmer now goes to the village center to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to visit and engage in various forms of recreation. In addition, the farmer's sons and daughters attend the village high school.

In view of the trend toward concentration of services it would not be surprising to see many of the younger children being taken into the village to attend elementary schools. Since village enrollments have also declined, the pupils from farming areas could probably be absorbed without any great expansion of existing school plants.

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How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully  
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

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School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.

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